Chapter 6

Achievement vs. Social Justice: How One School Straddled this Thin Line

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the use of an instructional model called platooning as a strategy to raise student achievement at a diverse, urban public elementary school. Pressure in schools, particularly on teachers, to demonstrate student growth on quantitative measures led teachers at this school to reorganize their instruction into a platooning model. This approach carried unanticipated consequences resulting in social justice issues for the students. The chapter covers the tensions that led to the adoption of the model and the theoretical constructs of social justice that were violated. Although these teachers would not describe what happened from a social justice framework, the level of concern for students, and the teachers’ determination to make empowered decisions on their behalf, demonstrates the fundamental concepts of the social justice agenda in public education.

INTRODUCTION

When schooling is based on obedience and conformity it reminds us that these qualities and dispositions are the hallmarks of every authoritarian regime throughout history. (Stern & Flinders, 2010, p. 5) Because of the public, sensational nature of high stakes testing in the United States, districts and schools often implement reactive strategies intended to raise student achievement. These strategies, while described as best practice, are often implemented without a basis of support within the context and confines of the settings.
Often unintentional adverse effects on students are the result. While this form of experimentation somewhat informs the field at an ideological level, the generations of children who make up the fodder for this experimentation often pay a very high price. As Stern and Flinders (2010) remind us, “evidence is always the enemy of dogma, and this is faith-based, fact-free school policy at its purest” (p. 6). But when experimentation goes awry, it is often the teachers who anticipated the outcome at the start. This chapter describes this phenomenon when teachers speak up in defense of the students.

At Eagle Elementary School (a pseudonym), a form of experimentation was implemented as a schoolwide instructional model known as platooning. This departmentalized model was used for four years, which was consistent with many metro Denver public schools. Although the intended goal of the platooning model was to raise student achievement by allowing specialized instruction at grade level, the unforeseen and detrimental effects of this structure on students’ esteem and cultural identity resulted in little to no academic growth and harmful affective results for the diverse population at Eagle Elementary School.

As with most noncommercial reform initiatives, the implementation of platooning at Eagle Elementary was an attempt to solve the academic stagnation of the majority of the students at the school and thereby significantly support the entire student population. Although some top-down pressure came from the central district to initiate this approach, the teachers at Eagle Elementary were enthusiastic about the opportunities platooning would provide to give focused support in reading, math, and writing. By focusing on only one content area to teach, instruction could be differentiated to the specific needs of the ability-grouped students that marched through each classroom every day. By ability grouping the students through platooning, teachers could better address the specific needs of both low achieving and high achieving students with appropriate skills development and materials. The teachers at Eagle Elementary looked forward to deepening their lessons for student needs by focusing on one area of instruction and allowing their team members to focus on the others.

The faculty thought that focusing on one academic area and using differentiation for each leveled group would provide more support for academic growth, but the unanticipated affective results on the students from this grouping model eliminated any positive student academic outcomes. Research confirms that when a learner’s affective filters are raised (Krashen, 1981, Hartnett-Edwards, 2006) the cognitive ability of the learner is sharply diminished. The teachers at Eagle Elementary didn’t need to know the research to explain what was happening to their students: the teachers and administrators began to see, first hand, the adverse effects of the platooning model on their children. The message to be learned from this story, and the theme of this chapter, is not how heinous the platooning model can be on unsuspecting children, but how the wisdom and strength of the adults in the building led to a willingness at the school level to immediately put an end to platooning.

BACKGROUND

Should discussions of the future of school reform be less about the pet ideas of professional reformers and more about what we’re doing to young people in the institution called school? (Elmore, 2011, p. 2).

In today’s American classrooms where mandates are too often dictated from above, watching a school recognize its mistakes and be willing to effectively make significant changes provides a wonderful example of what Freire called “education for transformation” (Wallerstein, 1987, p. 33). The school’s actions exemplify a Freirian central
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